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ABSTRACT

Concerns that students who have learning difficulties and disabilities (LDDs) and who are enrolled in further education (FE) colleges were being excluded from the basic entitlement to accreditation prompted a review of the system of 16-19 qualifications in 1995. It was recommended that England's national qualifications framework be revised and entry-level awards designed to offer progression to foundation level be offered. Since that recommendation, FE colleges have been scrambling to find alternatives to college certification for learners with LDDs, and a clear trend of FE colleges turning to open college networks (OCNs) has been noted. The increasing popularity of OCNs, which offer quality assurance for units of achievement devised by practitioners, arises from their relevance and flexibility. A wide range of accreditation options are now available or will be soon. The challenge of picking and mixing available options is to maintain curriculum coherence and ensure that progression routes are available. The move from college accreditation to external accreditation has generally been viewed positively, although there are concerns that some awards may not meet learners' needs and may distort the curriculum. (Appended are a table summarizing current accreditation options and a list of 13 Further Education Development Agency publications.) (MN)

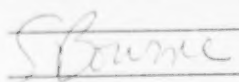
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Access to accreditation

Background

The issue of access to accreditation is one which has presented challenges to people concerned with educational provision for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. Historically, FE colleges provided courses designed specifically for these learners offering college certificates or no formal recognition of achievement. This picture is rapidly changing as a result of concerns that learners were being excluded from the basic entitlement to accreditation and that there was no recognition of the intrinsic value of accreditation in motivating and rewarding them for their achievements. A further impetus to FE college staff to seek appropriate forms of accreditation has come from the Further Education Funding Councils' (FEFCs) funding requirement that learning programmes should, in time, lead to external accreditation and that college certificates will no longer be an acceptable outcome for funding purposes.

The issue of accreditation is highly topical. In April 1995, Sir Ron Dearing was invited to undertake a review to strengthen, consolidate and improve the

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framework of 16-19 qualifications. In the course of the review he identified the need to examine how the current framework meets the requirements of learners at all levels, including those described as 'low attainers' and 'underachievers'. The Dearing review reported in March 1996 and set an agenda for change.

National qualifications framework

The present framework of qualification has three main pathways to qualifications for learners in FE: the 'academic' pathway of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and GCE A levels; an applied pathway of General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ); and a vocational pathway — National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). NVQs were designed specifically for education and training in the workplace and GNVQs were introduced as the third pathway to bridge the academic and vocational divide. To help overcome the disparity of perceptions of the academic and the vocational pathways, Sir Ron Dearing has proposed that GNVQs should now be called 'Applied A levels'.

An exclusive framework

Not only does this framework exclude a substantial number of learners, but also at present only a minority of learners in FE undertake courses leading to GCE A levels, GNVQ and NVQs. Most are on programmes leading to a wide range of other vocational qualifications. (There are 30,000 qualifications on the FEFC database.)

It has been estimated that the pathways of this framework have proven to be either inappropriate for, or unattainable by, about 20% of the FE population. The reasons for this include: curriculum

content which does not match learners' needs; the first level of the qualification is too high for some learners (especially those with learning difficulties); the overall size of the qualification is too large; the language and the specifications exclude some learners; and assessment practices which present barriers to learners with disabilities and learning difficulties.

Dearing review of 16-19 qualifications

The recommendations of the Dearing report are wide ranging. They include a national framework of national awards, which encompasses the three main qualification pathways, at four national levels, introducing a new Entry level. Existing awards at Entry level are to be 'kitemarked' if they meet specified quality criteria. New awards are to be introduced to accredit skills for adult life to meet the needs of learners with learning difficulties.

Sir Ron Dearing's Review recognised the gap in the national qualifications framework at the pre foundation level. Practitioners have expressed the need for an inclusive national qualifications framework, which is accessible to all learners, can encompass the full range of existing qualifications and includes a wider range of levels. There is also an expressed need for approved, nationally recognised qualifications at the pre foundation level which offer clear progression routes to the existing pathways. This is required to address the need for accreditation for learners whose achievements are currently at a level prior to key stage 4 level 5 or GCSE grade G or NCVQ level 1, which includes many people with learning difficulties.

In response to the demand for accreditation at pre level 1, awarding bodies have developed a range of awards. Sir Ron Dearing responded to this by proposing Entry level awards designed to offer progression to foundation level. He has suggested that Entry level awards

should be developed initially in the key skills of Communication, Application of Number and Information Technology. However, it would be unfortunate if initial development was limited to those key skills which present the greatest difficulty and at which learners may have been previously unsuccessful, rather than focus on the achievement of practical skills through which key skills may be developed. Awards meeting the quality criteria set to secure the 'kitemark' will contribute to the proposed family of 'national certificates'.

In order to produce a report which is politically acceptable and will bring about change, Sir Ron Dearing has taken a pragmatic approach which sometimes lacks detail. In some cases, the recommendations are in tension with one another. For example, the demand for increased rigour in assessment has led to the proposal that kitemarked Entry level awards must be externally marked or moderated and conducted under controlled conditions which must contribute to at least 50% of the overall award. This proposal, if implemented, is likely to have an impact on the accessibility of any kitemarked awards. Similarly, the rationalisation required to form a national framework with three distinct pathways, could decrease flexibility and reduce access.

Qualifications and funding

Funding from both Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and the FEFCs depends to some degree on learners' achievements. TEC funding is largely output related, with payment being made for the achievement of NVQs, other approved qualifications and employment outcomes. The FEFCs' funding methodologies have a small proportion devoted to outcomes, but they do fund the achievement of qualifications contributing to National Targets for Education and Training (NTETs) at a slightly higher rate.

Reasons for offering accreditation

The reasons for offering accreditation are to:

- recognise and record learning and achievement
- motivate learners
- enable progression in FE or to employment or employment schemes
- secure funding

How colleges accredit learners with LDD

Research based on interviews with 20 colleges, a range of awarding bodies and discussions with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), sought to map and review the accreditation opportunities available to learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. The findings indicated that colleges were using a wide variety of forms of accreditation and qualifications from a range of awarding bodies.

Colleges were generally trying to find alternatives to college certification and the process of searching for alternatives was described variously as 'scrabbling around' or 'struggling' to guess which qualifications will be approved in the future. Few respondents were settled in their choices, with most seeking alternatives or additions.

OCN accreditation

From this scramble and uncertainty, a clear trend was noted of colleges turning to Open College Networks (OCNs) for accreditation. The increasing popularity of OCNs which offer quality assurance for units of achievement devised by practitioners, arises from the relevance and

flexibility they provide. Colleges cite a range of features as important in choosing OCN accreditation. These include:

- the flexibility to accredit relevant learning outcomes
- the opportunity to devise units appropriate for adults
- a wider range of levels, including Entry level
- units of learning which can be accredited in manageable 'bites' acting as a powerful motivator
- the potential to accumulate and transfer credits toward locally agreed targets for progression

The opportunity to devise their own units, although highly valued by teachers, has led to the proliferation of similar units. It may be time to rationalise the number of unique units and to develop a range of nationally recognised units which may then be incorporated into individualised learning programmes.

There is a range of accreditation options available or being developed, of which the most commonly mentioned awarding bodies and awards include:

- ASDAN — FE Awards, Youth Awards, Workright
- BTEC — BTEC Award
- CENTRA — Independent Living, Work Preparation Skills
- City and Guilds — Skillpower, Numberpower and Wordpower
- LCCI — Vocational Access Certificate, Numberpower, Wordpower
- OCN — Credits
- Oxford and Cambridge Delegacy — Team and Young Enterprise
- RSA — National Skills Profile

Details of these are given in the Appendix.

Records of Achievement (ROAs) are also available. ROAs can be used to action plan, record broad achievements not formally recognised in other awards and record all other qualifications and certificates. However, the currency depends on the value attributed to ROAs by the receiving establishments, whether FE, HE or employers and this varies. In the North West and North Wales, the Northern Partnership Record of Achievement (NPRA) is particularly popular and is in widespread usage for all learners. A relaunch of the National Record of Achievement has been recommended by the Dearing Review.

In many cases colleges accredit their programmes in a number of different ways, which may include whole awards; part of the specifically designed forms of accreditation listed above; and units or elements from qualifications in the national qualification framework. The challenge of this pragmatic pick-and-mix approach is to maintain curriculum coherence and to ensure that progression routes are available.

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR SELECTING ACCREDITATION

- National recognition
- a common framework for all learners
- available at a full range of levels
- offers unit accreditation
- has clearly defined progression routes
- has an accessible assessment regime
- rigorous quality processes
- has currency and status

Conclusion

The move from college certification to external accreditation has generally been viewed positively although there are concerns that some awards may not meet learners needs and may distort the curriculum. There are also worries that choice may be limited in future as may opportunities for innovation and creativity. The positive effects of accreditation are described as:

- a streamlining of provision
- clearer progression routes with greater opportunities
- higher status

- greater credibility
- improved rigour for the provision
- a more focused and relevant curriculum.

Sir Ron Dearing's proposal to include accreditation for learners at Entry level within a national framework provides a positive step forward. It will be essential though that this recognises and builds on current best practice and that the recommendations for assessment, kitemarking and the rationalisation of existing awards, do not create new barriers to access.

Appendix: Current accreditation options

Awarding body	Name of award	Purpose and target group	Content and structure	Assessment regime
Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN)	Towards Independence	• Promotes progression in personal autonomy • designed for those with learning difficulties and disabilities post 16	Choice of modules available including: • IPP • meal preparation and cooking • spending money • getting to know a group • knowing about myself • out in the community • coping with people • current affairs • getting ready to go out • using a computer	Each learner has an achievement record and selected modules. Levels of support can be indicated National certification for one or more modules available to validated centres
ASDAN	Workright	• A specific work skills toolkit • designed for those with learning difficulties post 16 who are extending their education	In the workplace: • assuming responsibility for self • personal presentation and hygiene • performing • working with others	Each learner has an achievement record with the levels of support given Verification and certification to national standards available through network meetings or centre visits
ASDAN	Foundation Training Award	• Facilitates access to the NCVQ framework • particularly designed for post 16 learners • opportunities to demonstrate general work skills and training and workplace environment • can be used in any occupational setting	Preparatory level: • improving own learning and performance • maintaining work standards • responding to problems • working with others Also NCVQ core skills units: • improving own learning and performance • working with others • problem solving • additional units available in application of number communication and IT	Learners build up portfolios of supporting evidence and an achievement record Verification and certification to national standards through network meetings and centre visits Certificates reflect the number of units and levels achieved

Awarding body	Name of award	Purpose and target group	Content and structure	Assessment regime
ASDAN	FE Award and Youth Award	• 16+ age group • 14-25 age range • development of personal social skills through activity	Available at levels 1, 2 and 3 FE modules include: • rights and responsibilities • job search • independent living Youth Award Modules e.g. — health and survival — the community	Learner record and portfolio of supporting evidence assessed to national standards
BTEC	BTEC Award (PILOT)	• Recognises lifetime learning at all levels • supports adult returners and students with learning difficulties • access to the national framework	• Recognition of a range of levels — no overall level of achievement • recognition of local and regional programmes • can combine units from different qualification routes, such as GNVQ, NVQ, OCN	Verified and certificated to national standards Certification for each completed unit
City and Guilds	Skillpower (PILOT)	• Provides an introduction to GNVQ and NVQ • designed for learners with learning difficulties	Core: • IT • number • communication skills • life skills Introductory options on: • enterprise • science and technology • foreign languages and culture • GNVQ/NVQ access	Local assessment via portfolio of evidence, plus external verifier and sampling Certification for each completed unit Full certificate for five core skills units, one introductory unit and one GNVQ or NVQ access unit

Awarding body	Name of award	Purpose and target group	Content and structure	Assessment regime
CENTRA	Independent Living	• Aims to support independent living • designed for students with learning difficulties and disabilities	• Personal aspects • communication aspects • numeracy aspects • manipulative aspects • in the areas of the home, personal relationships, food, clothing, safety and basic first aid	Ten assessments to be chosen to reflect coverage of competences and syllabus Each assessment is graded (distinction, credit, pass, fail) CENTRA verifier visits new centres and all centres receive one visit per year toward end of programme
CENTRA	Work Preparation Skills	• Aims to provide preparation for work • progression to NVQ 1 • designed for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (possibly those who have completed Independent Living above), mixed ability trainees, learners lacking qualifications, adults	Core: • health and safety • personal action planning • self help and independence (including communication, numeracy, group work, planning and problem solving) • new technology plus: • vocational options	Certificate awarded to learners who achieve satisfactory standard in four core modules and at least one vocational option; record of achievement for those who achieve fewer modules Each module is graded (distinction, credit, pass, fail) CENTRA verifier visits new centres and all centres receive one visit per year toward end of programme
London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examinations Board (LCCIEB)	Numberpower	• Develops numeracy skills required in work or daily life • designed for adults	Three levels — foundation, stage 1, stage 2 foundation level — 7 units stage 1 — 6 units stage 2 — 6 units all covering: • money and time • measuring length and weight • numerical and graphical information	Continuous assessment; units, elements, performance criteria, range statements Approved centre assessors, plus external LCCIEB verifiers who visit centres twice per year Certification for each completed unit Awarded jointly with Basic Skills Agency (previously ALBSU)

Awarding body	Name of award	Purpose and target group	Content and structure	Assessment regime
LCCIEB	Wordpower	• Develops communication skills required in work or daily life • designed for adults	• Four levels — foundation, stage 1, stage 2, stage 3 foundation — 5 units stage 1 — 6 units stage 2 — 4 units stage 3 — 5 units covering: • reading text and graphical material • completing forms and pre-formatted documents (f + s1) • using reference systems (s2+3) • communicating in writing • conversing (f + s1) • extracting information and exchanging (s1,2+3) • making a presentation (s3)	As Numberpower
LCCIEB	Vocational Access Certificate	• Offers a route into NVQs • offers a preliminary vocational award for those not ready to access level 1 NVQs • designed for people of all ages • mirrors the quality assurance processes of NVQs	• Core units (mandatory) • core units (optional) • occupational units covering the areas of retail, administration, construction, catering and hairdressing New occupational areas now available: • care • horticulture • motor vehicle	Full award; four mandatory units and two units from at least one occupational sector Certification for each completed unit Continuous assessment, approved centre assessors, plus LCCIEB external verifiers who visit centres twice per year; initially, centre registration lasts three years

Awarding body	Name of award	Purpose and target group	Content and structure	Assessment regime
Northern Examinations and Assessment Board (NEAB)	Northern Partnership for Records of Achievement	• School and college students of all ages and abilities • designed to recognise achievement in any area of the curriculum	• Most units are written by teachers and validated by NEAB • units specify intended learning outcomes and the evidence required to confirm achievement • some centrally produced units to accredit parts of GCSE syllabuses or recognise achievement below GCSE grade G	Teachers carry out assessments NEAB assessors monitor teachers assessments Achievement of each unit is recognised through a 'statement of achievement' which specifies exactly what the student has done Students receive a 'letter of credit' which gives the titles of units successfully completed. The certificates are compatible with the National Record of Achievement (NRA)
Open College Network	OCN Credits in Credit Record	• Accreditation for any learning programme in any curriculum area, matched to the needs of the learner • particularly relevant where no suitable national certification exists • embraces four levels from Entry to Access to HE • designed to enable credit accumulation and transfer	• Content and structure of learning programme designed by tutors and submitted for approval to a cross-sector panel of peers • units specify title, learning outcomes, assessment criteria, number of credits and level together with programme information on target group, centre arrangements, etc. • one credit is awarded for achievement which represents a notional learning time of 30 hours • levels 1, 2, 3 match to NVQ, GNVQ levels • different levels of units may be combined	Assessment of portfolio of work via assessment criteria in submission document OCN-appointed external moderators Certification of individual units can be built into submission Mutual recognition of credits by all regional OCNs with full membership of National Open College Network (NOCN) and their members; nationwide coverage

Awarding body	Name of award	Purpose and target group	Content and structure	Assessment regime
Oxford and Cambridge Delegacy	Young Enterprise (Team Enterprise is a programme of Young Enterprise designed for students with learning difficulties and disabilities)	Designed to give students with learning difficulties and disabilities the opportunity to 'learn by doing' by running their own company guided and supported by advisers from business and their own teachers	See purpose	Voluntary examination conducted by the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations. Certificates are issued at three levels: Distinction, Credit, Pass
Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Examinations Board	National Skills Profile (PILOT)	- A profiling framework underpinning GNVQ core skills - route into mainstream qualifications - designed for those experiencing barriers to learning - awarded at three grades: - first grade — for those with severe learning difficulties - second grade — for moderate learning difficulties - third grade — for those who fail to achieve GCSE grade G	Five skill areas: - communication - numeracy - IT - personal skills - practical work skills Five modules at each grade, total of 75 modules available, with progressive themes in-built Vocational areas at grade 3 to be developed in the future	Any combination of modules Local assessment plus external moderation Certification available on demand A profile statement lists modules achieved No minimum number of modules for certification Different levels of module may be combined

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